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PROGRAM ABC World News Tonight

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SUBJECT Nicaragua

PETER JENNINGS: Another question in our most recent ABC News/Washington Post poll had to do with the government of Nicaragua. Seventy percent of the people we asked said they oppose any American attempt to overthrow the government in Nicaragua, even though sixty percent believe that is exactly what President Reagan wants to do.

As John McWethy reports, in the midst of the Administration's fight to renew aid for anti-government forces, Nicaragua's president has thrown something of a curve.

JOHN MCWETHY: Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega, in a surprise move, has met the Reagan Administration's recent harsh criticism with a new peace initiative, an invitation to members of Congress to visit Nicaragua, to go anywhere, see anything they want, to prove Nicaragua's intentions are peaceful.

Secretary of State Shultz, who was on Capitol Hill today, said the State Department was studying Ortega's initiative, but was skeptical.

SECRETARY OF STATE GEORGE SHULTZ: We haven't said that we are unwilling to meet with them. Just that there's no point in it right now unless they have a different view.

We don't want a Soviet base on the landmass of the Western Hemisphere. One Cuba is enough.

MCWETHY: Administration analysts concede that Ortega's so-called peace initiative is a stroke of political genius, that it could well sink the President's drive to win funding for the guerrillas that he calls freedom fighters.

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On the floor of the House today, the President's Nicaraguan policy had few friends.

REP. RICHARD DURBIN: We drive Nicaragua into the arms of the Kremlin, and we're shocked when we find them there.

REP. GERRY STUDDS: The President wants Congress to resume funding for military operations directed against the people and territory of Nicaragua. That, too, is tantamount to a declaration of war.

MCWETHY: Ironically, while Ortega is offering a peace initiative, U.S. Intelligence sources say that 42,000 Nicaraguan troops have massed on the border with Honduras. Just across that border are 17,000 of the guerrillas that President Reagan wants to help.

Some analysts contend that a Nicaraguan attack into Honduras aimed at wiping out the guerrillas could come at any time.

JENNINGS: McWethy mentions the number of Nicaraguans on the border. For the Nicaraguans, it has been no easy feat to assemble a force in the tens of thousands. It seems that a large percentage of young Nicaraguans don't want to join the Sandinista army.

ABC's Peter Collins has been on special assignment.

PETER COLLINS: This is life in an army training camp as depicted by Sandinista TV. There's good food, good training, good times.

And this is the reality facing many young Nicaraguan recruits. About 15 or 20 are being killed every week in ambushes by the so-called Contras.

This is a deserter from the Sandinista army.

TRANSLATOR: They issued us uniforms, guns and ammunition, and sent us directly to the mountains without training. At that time, I was 13.

In our second ambush, nine of us were killed.

COLLINS: The fear of getting killed, combined with opposition to the Sandinista revolution, has produced widespread resistance to what is officially called patriotic military service.

This woman has eight sons. She's hiding her eldest at home.

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TRANSLATOR: We don't want our sons to go and drench their hands in blood. For what?

COLLINS: These are draft-dodgers, literally on the run. They agreed to meet with ABC News in the hills where they've been hiding near the capital of Managua.

TRANSLATOR: You feel like a thief or a murderer. You go around like a man without a country.

COLLINS: It's estimated that of the 200,000 young men eligible for the draft, only 65 percent have registered. Desertions from the army are running at 20 percent.

In response, the Sandinistas have set up roadblocks to catch draft-evaders. The checks are deceptively casual. As one youngster put it, you take a bus and you wind up in the army.

The young draft-resisters say one thing over and over. They don't want to fight in what they see as a civil war among Nicaraguans for the interest of one political party, the Sandinistas.

TRANSLATOR: In the beginning I was with the revolution. But the people have been tricked. The basic reason that we here, like many people all over Nicaragua, don't want to go is that we don't want to defend these people.

COLLINS: Sandinista leaders have told foreign diplomats that because of the resistance, they're having trouble manning the army.

As for these resisters, some said they would join the guerrillas.